DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 549 IR 055 002

AUTHOR Sutton, Ronald E.
TITLE Fifteen Reasons To Study Visual Literacy.
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 7p.; In: Visual Literacy in the Digital Age: Selected Readings from the Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association (25th, Rochester, New York, October 13-17, 1993); see IR 055 055.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Aural Learning; Higher Education; Visual Environment; *Visual Learning; *Visual Literacy; Visual Perception; Visual Stimuli
IDENTIFIERS American University DC; *Visual Thinking

ABSTRACT

This paper is a report on a decade of teaching visual literacy at the American University (Washington, D.C.). Visual literacy is defined as an awareness that comes with appropriate development of basic visual and aural competencies. The 15 reasons for studying visual literacy are perception, drawing, expression, brain awareness, design elements, analysis/appreciation, museums, cartoons, graphics, photography, phototherapy, image manipulation, film video, documentaries and reality, and advertisements. (JLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 370 549

Fifteen Reasons to Study Visual Literacy

by Ronald Sutton

The American University
4400 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20016

1R055002

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Alice Walker

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

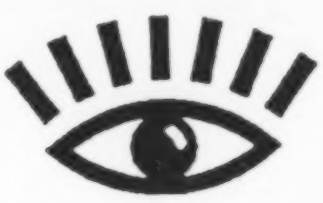
Fifteen Reasons to Study Visual Literacy

Ronald E. Sutton

Introduction

This presentation, *Fifteen Reasons to Study Visual Literacy*, is a report on a decade of teaching Visual Literacy in the School of Communication at The American University in Wash., D.C. The course was first taught in the Spring of 1982 and was designed for sophomores majoring in Visual Media (Film, Photography and Television). In 1989 Visual Literacy entered the General Education Program of American University as a Foundation Course in the Arts. Eight sections of 35 students are taught now annually.

There is a difference between just having your eyes open as you go through life and <u>really seeing</u>. Looking and learning go hand in hand and the need to <u>see</u> life in a discerning manner is essential.



Another name for this is Visual Literacy, a term celebrating its 25th anniversary. Visual Literacy is the awareness that comes with the appropriate development of our basic visual and aural competencies. It involves an awareness of who we are as individuals, an awareness that we are not alone...and an awareness that we communicate with one another, beyond speech with a variety of visual codes:

.....body language,
.....gesture,
.....print/graphic codes such as writing, etc.
.....painting,
.....sculpture,
.....architecture,
.....symbolic rituals,
.....theater,
.....costumes,
.....photographs,
.....films - old and new,
.....television,
.....and computer screens.

Visual Literacy is the awareness that the image (and sound) are a series of production decisions on the part of artists, producers and others.

All visual/aural communication is a construct created in a particular social,

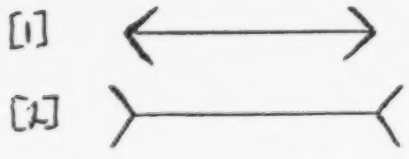
1R055002

cultural and political context. There is meaning and power in Visual Literacy and there is humor and wit, joy and pleasure too.

As our founding father, Jack Debes, stated, if we develop our "vision competencies" and use them in appreciative ways, we will "comprehend and enjoy the masterworks of visual communication." (fr. *The Loom of Visual Literacy*, 1969.)

Based on a decade of experience teaching Visual Literacy, here are my fifteen reasons for studying it. Add more of your own at the end of my list.

[1] **PERCEPTION — To know that what you see is not always actually what is "out there."**



You can see that line [1] is shorter than line [2] as perceived; but, if measured you will discover that the lines are of identical length. This is called the Mueller-Lyer optical illusion. Another one: is the figure below a pair of faces or a vase?

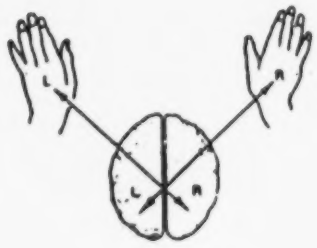
[2] **DRAWING — To draw or sketch what you see as a means of recording it or sharing it with others.**

This is a before and after self portrait done almost ten years ago by Jim Lutz, after twelve weeks working through the Betty Edwards book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. Jim is now President of his own Design company, **Arena Graphics**, which handles major accounts for stadiums such as Camden Yards, home of the Baltimore Oriole baseball team. He is a frequent speaker in my Visual Literacy class.

[3] **EXPRESSION** — To express yourself in images as well as words. The ability to image oneself is often a gateway to self-understanding.

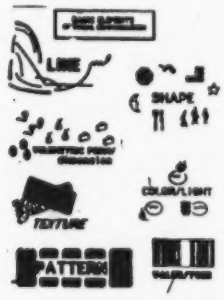
Below are two examples of self expression. The one one the left is personal logo done by a student some years ago in the class, and on the right is a more recent example of a hand map, my own, done with the class last year.

4] **BRAIN AWARENESS — To learn you have a left and right brain mode that can facilitate your learning, managing, creativity, etc.**



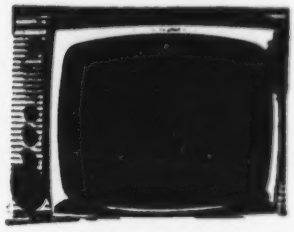
In class we use "brain power" test sheets, a video clip from the PBS series on *The Brain*, and a number of different exercises done in a drawing portfolio from the *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* to illustrate this phenomenon.

[5] **DESIGN ELEMENTS** — To learn the basic elements of design including Dot, Line, Shape, Volumetric Form, Color, Value, Texture, Pattern, Structure, Space, Rhythm, etc. (from our current text by Barry Nemett, *Images, Objects, and Ideas: Viewing the Visual Arts.*

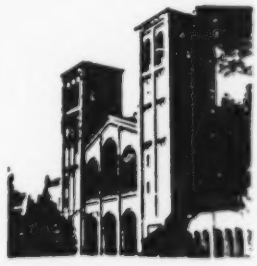


[6] **ANALYSIS/APPRECIATION** — To learn to analyze and appreciate how all these elements are combined in...

...Drawings,
...Paintings,
...Sculpture,
...Architecture,
...Photographs,
...Films,
...and Television.



[7] **MUSEUMS** — To enjoy visiting museums of all kinds and find fascinating the various styles of sculpture and architecture around the world and in one's home town.

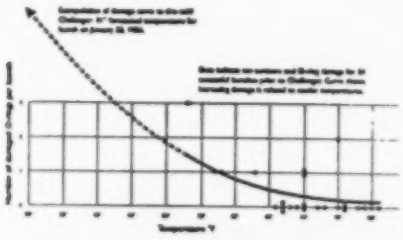


[8] **CARTOONS** — To understand cartoons, both political and cultural.

Herblock from the *Washington Post* and Gary Larson from his regular synicated strips and books have been main stays of the class for years.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

[9] **GRAPHICS** — To know how to read and present visual information of all kinds, especially graphic information.



Above is a graph from the presentation Edward Tufte did in 1992 at our Annual Conference in Pittsburgh, PA, on *Imagery, Science and the Arts*. It would have saved the lives of those on the Challenger space shuttle had it been the one used to present data to those making the launch decision. This is an interesting area that I am still trying to integrate into my course.

[10] **PHOTOGRAPHY** — To understand the history, development and importance of photography; and to take interesting photographs with existing cameras; and to learn how the electronic cameras of the future will alter our view of photographic imagery.

[11] **PHOTOTHERAPY** — To learn how your family album can be a source of insight and healing of personal dysfunction.

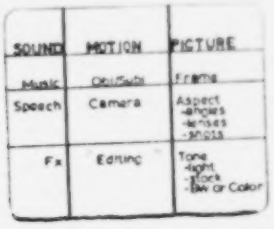
This new aspect of photography was first introduced to me at the IVLA Conference in British Vancouver, Canada, in 1982. Both Judy Weiser, head of the Phototherapy Center in Vancouver, and Alan Etin, a therapist from Richmond, VA., have presented to my students on this area that proved useful in my own therapy.

[12] IMAGE MANIPULATION — To learn not to trust photographs due to manipulation then and now.

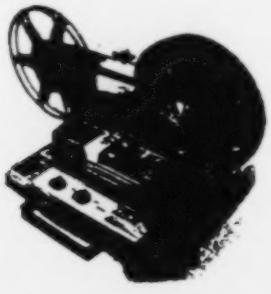
This new area of personal research developed by my colleague, Professor Ann Zelle, and myself was the subject of presentations (IVLA 1990 Conference) and publications (*Investigating Visual Literacy*, Jan. 91; and *JVL*, Spr. '91; IVLA Symposium, Delphi, Greece, 1993 - in press for 1994.)

This presentation to the class involves slides, transparencies and video clips from the feature films *Zelig* and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*.

[13] **FILM/VIDEO** --- To learn how to read a film; how film is like written language and how it is quite different than written language; to learn the basic elements of SOUND, MOTION, PICTURE; and to know something of the origins, development and special tricks of the Magic Lantern.



[14] **DOCS ARE NOT REALITY** --- To learn that documentary films/videos are a 'creative treatment of actuality', not reality and not to be trusted.



Examples here are classic (*Olympia Diving Sequence*), as well as contemporary (*Survival Run*), and stress the problems of fidelity to truth that can come from reenacted sequences as well as the dangers of their use in the guise of actual historical events.

[15] **ADVERTISEMENTS** --- To recognize how advertisements affect us and stigmatize us, promoting often gender, racial, ethnic, class and age stereotypes, obviously or with suggestive subliminal psycho-sexual stimuli.

In class we study John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, and look at Jean Kilbournes's *Still Killing Us Softly*, to stimulate our discussion and examination of this problem.

My own research on Subliminal reception (IVLA Conf. 1989; in *Perceptions of Visual Literacy)*, is presented.

It has been an exciting and provocative decade of teaching and these are my fifteen reasons for studying Visual Literacy.

What would you add?

_____

_____

_____

[My appreciation to Sara Sutton for help with the illustrations for this paper.]

BEST COPY AVAILABLE